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ABSTRACT

Written from a social interaction perspective, this digest provides an overview of children's language development in the first five years of life. Viewing language learning as both a social and a developmental process, the digest's three sections outline the process of language development in the first year, the second and third year, and in the preschool years. It argues that, to acquire a language, children must interact with other more competent language users as well as explore various aspects of the linguistic system. It concludes that during the early years of language learning, children also create, test, and revise their hypotheses regarding the use of language. (Contains 13 references.) (SR)

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Language Development in the Early Years

By Mei-Yu Lu

The Social Root of Language Development

This digest, written from a social interaction perspective, provides readers an overview of children's language development in the first five years of their life. The primary function of language, according to Vygotsky (1962), "in both adults and children is communication, social contact" (p.19). Through daily interaction with other language users, children learn how to use language to convey messages, to express feelings, and to achieve intentions which enable them to function in a society. Muspratt, Luke, and Freebody (1997) argue that the language that members of a specific community use reflects the values and beliefs that are embedded in their culture and ideologies; in the same way, the culture and dominant ideologies within learning contexts also have a strong impact on the learners' perceptions of the language learning process. In other words, language is a cultural tool which provides the means for members of a group to retain their shared identity and to relate with each other. Through the process of language learning, parents socialize their children into socially and culturally appropriate ways of behaving, speaking, and thinking.

The process of language acquisition for young children is built upon a variety of experiences. From birth, parents and caregivers involve infants in communicative exchanges. These exchanges accompany activities shared by adults and infants, such as bathing, feeding, and dressing. During these activities, parents and caregivers comment on the infants' actions and often repeat and exaggerate their vocalizations (Fernald & Mazzie, 1991). Such communicative exchanges between adults and infants function as a form of social interaction. This social interaction helps build intimacy between adults and infants, enhances infants' interests in their environment, and provides them with stimulation for later language development (Burkato & Daehler, 1995).

The First Year

Crying is the earliest form of infant vocalization. But after only a few weeks of experience with language, infants begin to vocalize in addition to crying: they coo. Infants generally begin to coo at about one month of age (Shaffer, 1999). Cooing is repeating vowel-like sounds such as "oooooh" or "aaaaah." Infants coo when their parents or caregiver interact with them. At around 3 or 4 months, infants start to add consonant sounds to their cooing, and they begin to babble at between 4 and 6 months of age. Babbling consists of consonant and vowel sounds. Infants are able to combine these consonant and vowel sounds into syllable-like sequences, such as mamama, kaka, and dadadada (Berk, 2000; Shaffer, 1999). Through interacting with parents or caregivers by such cooing and babbling, infants develop a sense of the role of language in communication by the end of the first year. The linkage between communication and sound-making signals the onset of true language (Glover & Bruning, 1987).

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The Second and Third Year

In the beginning of the second year, children's first words emerge. The first words are also called "holophrases" because children's productive vocabulary usually contains only one or two very simple words at a time, and they seem to utter single words to represent the whole meaning of an entire sentence (Shaffer, 1999). Children's first words are usually very different from adults' speech in terms of the pronunciation, and these first words are most frequently nominals--labels for objects, people, or events (Bukatko & Daehler, 1995). In addition, children's first words are quite contextual. They may use a single word to identify something or somebody under different conditions (such as saying "ma" when seeing mother entering the room), to label objects linked to someone (saying "ma" when seeing mother's lipstick), or to express needs (saying "ma" and extending arms for wanting a hug from the mother). In the initial stage of the first-word utterance, children produce words slowly. However, once they have achieved a productive vocabulary of ten words, children begin to add new words at a faster rate, called "vocabulary spurt" (Barrett, 1985).

By their second birthday, children begin to combine words and to generate simple sentences (Bukatko & Daehler, 1995). Initially, the first sentences are often two-word sentences, gradually evolving into longer ones. Children's first sentences have been called "telegraphic speech" because these sentences resemble the abbreviated language of a telegram. Like the telegram, children's first sentences contain mainly the essential content words, such as verbs and nouns, but omit the function words, such as articles, prepositions, and pronouns, auxiliary verbs (Berk, 2000).

Although children's first sentences seem to be ungrammatical in terms of adult standards, they are far more than strings of random words combined. Instead, they have a structure of their own. A characteristic of the structure is that some words, called

"pivot words," are used in a mostly fixed position, and are combined with other less frequently used words referred to as "open words," which can be easily replaced by other words (Braine, 1976). For example, a child may use "more" as a pivot word, and create sentences such as, "more cookie, "more car,"and "more doggie."

Creativity also plays an important role in this first sentence stage. Research has revealed that many of children's early sentences, such as "allgone cookie," and "more read" are creative statements which do not appear in adult speech (Shaffer, 1999). Like the first-word creation, context plays an important role in understanding children's first sentences because both require context in order that understanding can occur. As children's use of simple sentences increases, the amount of single-word use declines, and their sentences become increasingly elaborate and sophisticated. (Glover & Bruning, 1987).

The Preschool Years

By the time children are 3 1/2 to 4 years of age, they have already acquired many important skills in language learning. They have a fairly large working vocabulary and an understanding of the function of words in referring to things and actions. They also have a command of basic conversational skills, such as talking about a variety of topics with different audiences. Nevertheless, language development, especially vocabulary growth and conversational skills, continues (Glover & Bruning, 1987). It is generally agreed that vocabulary learning is not accomplished through formal instruction. Instead, the meaning of new words is usually acquired when children interact with other more skilled language users during such natural situations as riding, eating, and playing (Beals & Tabors, 1995). From these activities, children are able to construct hypotheses when hearing unfamiliar verbal strings. They then test these hypotheses by further observation or by making up new sentences themselves. Finally, through feedback and further exposure, children revise and confirm their hypotheses (Bukatko & Daehler, 1995).

The development of conversational skills also requires children's active interaction with other people. To communicate with others effectively, children need to learn how to negotiate, take turns, and make relevant as well as intelligible contributions (Schickedanz, Schickedanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 1998). Through interacting with other more experienced language users, children modify and elaborate their sentences in response to requests for more information (Peterson & McCabe, 1992). As children interact with their playmates, their conversations usually include a series of turn-taking dialogues (Glover & Bruning, 1987). In addition, young children learn to adjust their messages to their listeners' level of understanding (Shatz & Gelman, 1973).

By the time children enter elementary school, their oral language is very similar to that of adults (Shaffer, 1999). They have acquired the basic syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic elements of their native language. Language development will continue, however, from early childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

Conclusion

In summary, language learning is both a social and a developmental process. To acquire a language, children must interact with other more competent language users as well as explore various aspects of the linguistic system. During the early years of language learning, children also create, test, and revise their hypotheses regarding the use of language. Parents and early childhood educators should provide these young learners with developmentally appropriate language activities, offer opportunities for them to experiment with different aspects of language learning, and honor their creativity.

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